



**Federico Fellini: "The Cinema Seen as a Woman...": An Interview on the Day  
"City of Women" Premiered in Rome**

Gideon Bachmann; Federico Fellini

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# Federico Fellini:

## "The Cinema Seen as a Woman..."

AN INTERVIEW ON THE DAY "CITY OF WOMEN" PREMIERED IN ROME

**BACHMANN:** *I think that somewhere along the line I shall have to thank you for talking to me, because from what you've often said, you don't exactly seem to love journalists. But I want you to know that my thanks extend beyond journalism, because, as you will have noted, we are not really doing an interview. I am just blatantly using you to clarify some ideas, and what I am thanking you for is your ability to go beyond cinema and your work and those things that most journalists would be interested in, and allowing me to rip the cover off what seem to me to be the real problems of the day: the disappearance of human warmth and values.*

**FELLINI:** I have never said that I don't like journalists, because in a funny way I envy you. You are protected by your profession. Being a journalist these days is the only remaining profession that rewards you, psychologically, with a defense against the decline. You are a witness. The worse the thing is which you witness, the more it gratifies your vocation. You are the witness of horror. And it is your testimony which is exalted. You become the important witness of horrible events. This is true especially when the matter witnessed is inhuman, destructive. Being a journalist sometimes seems to me to be the only profession our times allow.

Mind you, I am saying this from a psychological point of view. Realizing oneself through the act of witnessing events as calamitous, in times as disturbing, as debunking and as decadent as ours, being a journalist is still a way of living, of feeling oneself protected, by one's own mission, one's own vocation. You are stronger, because you become a

stranger, you do not participate, you witness. You don't have the time to get involved, and you have a great alibi, too: telling it to the others. Intimately and profoundly your engagement remains minimal. It's almost like being an actor, living fictitious, fleeting lives. Preserving an adolescent dimension, they live longer. At 90 years of age, they put on make-up to appear "old." Something protective derives from dissociation, it is a schizoid phenomenon. And journalists, I sometimes feel, are also a bit like that.

*Was that your feeling when you yourself were working for newspapers? And isn't film-making a form of witnessing? It seems to me that your recent films are very strong in this respect, more than ever there is an engagement in them.*

I am not saying that an artist is not somewhat the same. He, too, is a witness. He just doesn't exercise it so directly, so painlessly as a journalist. There is greater engagement because that which is witnessed is lived at more intense levels, more profound, sometimes mythical levels. One interprets, not just witnesses. But a creator, too, is protected in times of tempest, in times of mourning. It all becomes ascetic, painless, through the interpretation needed for expressing it. Expression is a filter of a providential, protective sort, through which all passes: emotions, shocks, anger, fears, defeat, love, tenderness, ideologies, absorbing some of the pain. Other small dramas take up some of the slack: the drama of *how* to express, *how* to communicate. Thus your problems with reality, with sentiments, the problem of being, after all, just a weak, human creature and a small cog in society, suddenly turn into aesthetic prob-



lems. A sort of transference, delegating and burdening it all onto the back of another preoccupation, creates a new way of living it, an expressive way, which keeps you, to some degree, from being hurt. The sieve of expression redimensions the drama.

*All this concerns your relationship to the work. What happens later, in the relationship between the work and those who see it? Can't they feel that there is this sieve, and be less involved because of it?*

I have a curious lack of engagement with this second part of my work's life. Not because I do not feel concerned with it, so much, after it is finished (as I often say), and certainly not out of indifference, but this after-life, the public life of my films, is not really within my knowledge. The making of it absorbs all my energies; making a film, besides all the creative problems which all

artists have, involves you in a social endeavor. You are not just a creator but also a commander, you're at the top of a pyramid. Making a film is a metaphor for a type of social utopia: all together doing a thing, directed by one, but for the good of a cause . . .

*And all of you protected by the endeavor from the problems of reality?*

Protected by the myth of it. Being involved in realizing a dream. It is the same as a group working on a scientific problem and solving it or involved in geographical research and discovering a new continent, or the more common ideal of inventing and materializing a social form, working out a philosophical problem or creating a work of art. The myth of realization protects by involving you in something bigger than yourself: the aim, the achievement of a goal.

*Since most achieved goals fall apart quickly,*

*man seems to care more about the process of achieving them than about the goals themselves.*

Certainly, but I don't think this is conscious. We are educated to produce, to judge by the achieved, and this causes our unhappiness. If we stopped working for a goal and started working for the sake of work, we might get closer to some form of psychic health. Our functional education claims there is an achievement out there which needs to be reached, but of course there isn't. All there is, is the trip of going out there. That is probably the main reason why I do not like to talk about the films I have already made, or about their after-life. It's not so much the questions about the past, about things I have put behind me, but I have a feeling that concern with my past work holds me back, keeps me from continuing the trip beyond the oasis. After all, what have I come here to do? Just to take a short rest, find some water. But one doesn't stop at an oasis. What is there to do? I want to go on, keep going. You know yourself the meaning of the caravan . . .

I have often talked about the moment, usually occurring sometime during the final mixing, when I suddenly feel the film has become autonomous. Birth (sorry to sound banal and romantic!) has occurred, and although I may still be sitting there like an octopus with my arms extended across all the levers of the volume controls, in order to give the child its final push and life's breath, giving it the heartbeat like Frankenstein sucking up stellar energy, and despite the fact that I still identify with it completely in all its molecules, I now feel it plopping out of me, inexorably and forever. The life-giving has now occurred.

Then there comes this moment of perception, of clarity: you have done your best, have protected it, wanted it, guided it, controlled all its details, given it everything of yourself, programming its minutest elements, leaving nothing to chance, and suddenly it gets away from you. It is breathing on its own now. And from that moment on I feel no particular relation to it, no father-feeling. From this moment the life of this creature, this friend, this monster, this approximate form of life, interests me only little.

I would be lying to you if I said that I don't care how well it does outside, whether it makes its way, meeting friends, or what. It pleases me of course if it arouses sympathies. I prefer for it to

walk than to collapse. But I no longer feel linked to it. This makes it hard for me to talk about it and to comment on it. It seems vaguely indecent to me to do so. And just because I am the one who made it, I don't have the feeling that I am really authorized to discuss it. Somehow at that point I feel I know it less well than others do.

*What a pity mothers don't usually have this kind of respect for their creations. We might have a world with more autonomous men in it, less achievement-oriented.*

Pure Hassidic wisdom . . . Today there are too many of us. That in itself makes us competitive and achievement-oriented. The profoundly religious relationship to life was possible when we lived in small tribes, in natural conditions. But what has happened has happened, man can never go back. Maybe some new forms of knowledge, systems of life lived in small groups, can be undertaken, but it seems to me that most people are not even interested in knowing, in changing, and in being involved in research. I realize more and more that the things that disturb us profoundly, that fill our being and cause obscure nostalgia in us, most people are ignorant of, and they want to stay that way. They don't want to be shaken up, trying to get them to listen is bothersome to them. You become a disturber of the peace, a bore.

*The small tribe, living, as you say, in natural conditions, resembles the film crew, joined together by a common cause, and not shunning knowledge and involvement. The road from the breaking up of the tribe, via the left-over "tribe" called family, to the reductio-ad-absurdum of feminism, which is surely the last straw in the destruction of tribal bonds, seems to me to have been, in fact, the theme and common cause of your current film crew, in the making of City of Women, which shows what happens when these bonds are destroyed. The autonomization of the sexes, which in nature has never existed, is shown in your film to be a deadend street. Was that your intention in making it, to show this danger?*

I am very pleased by the fact that you see the film in this key. Making a film about a problem and not giving an answer to it—as obviously no artist can, especially in the cinema—makes the public always a bit uneasy. They expect some sort of resolution. They all seek certainty. And this search often keeps them from seeing the film for

what it is, for what its maker intended. We want others to provide slogans, ideology translated into pills, to be taken with the meal. It has become bothersome to use one's own head, tiresome to measure and weigh one's own life all the time. And recently it has been called indecent to be concerned with the private sphere, we are forced to think of classes and groups. . . . the annulment of the individual. . . . Look at the cult of youth: once the old had the respect of the tribe owing to their knowledge and experience, having overcome the years of fervor of instinct and the ferment of the blood, and they had an equilibrating influence. Today the old are regarded as being useless, especially in countries of development. It happens a little less in capitalist societies that have found maturity. Take England, where a man removed from productivity and strife can still find himself in controlling positions, at least not killed off at 65.

*Why do you think I have chosen England to live?*

Is that a question or an answer? I guess we are all seeking refuge from the world's decline; some in work and some in moving . . . so you are leaving Rome?

*Well, I still have my apartment at the Pantheon, but I come here less and less. In the summer, especially, the noise and the rowdiness of the people make it impossible. What bothers me most, is the growing lack of respect people have for each other and for traditions, ideas, values and emotions. It gets to the point where even saying this puts you in a category to be derided. And one other thing I find hard to take: approximation and the lack of originality. Nobody does anything beyond the minimum necessary and nobody has any new thinking to offer. But I don't think Rome is unique in this respect . . . I see you nodding: may I say then, that your film is about this, about the decline of values and the disappearance of the human dimension in modern life? About the end of togetherness?*

Certainly. And I am pleased that you suggest such a moving and at the same time alarming point of view. Because that is, in fact, how things really are. But at the same time I don't want the impression abroad that I made the film as a political platform. As you know, I have always refused this, because it seemed to me to be very limiting. I did not consider it right that my inclination to tell stories, my work in life, should be circum-

scribed by such a definition. But if by "political" we mean the demystification of the non-authentic, the unmasking of lies, the support of the plurality of ideas, the refusal of rigid viewpoints, the respect for the liberty of others, the understanding that your liberty ends where that of another person begins, then I would say that all my films have been and are political.

*In previous ones, in the end, there was always a sort of mystical acceptance of the horror of his existence by the protagonist. The films didn't have real endings but projected hope for the idea of life. And there was a sense of equilibrium between the body of the film and its human drama on the one hand, and the end, a sort of religious hope for man. In this film, it seems to me, the scales are more weighed on the side of horror.*

In the end of *City of Women* the protagonist consciously accepts the fact that he is dreaming. Waking up in the train, and deciding to go back to sleep because reality is beginning to become upsetting again (he sees his wife in the seat previously occupied by the feminist, the feminist has become a sort of courtesan, the two terrorist soubrettes turn out to be student girls), he accepts to go back into the tunnel with the knowledge that he now has made a contact with his inner, profound, mythical being. This time he will dream because he is deciding to dream. It will be a vigilant dream, full of attention for the profound, a witnessing dream. He goes back consciously into the dream in order to have a more lucid contact with himself. Lucid and fascinated at the same time, passionate and yet with a sense of distance. Intentionally without intention—a phrase, I think, taken from the Tao or some Hassidic book, but I don't want to sound stupidly philosophic—he decides to continue his trip but with his eyes open upon the dream. In fact, the very last shot of the film, at the very end after the titles, which come up as the train is in the tunnel again, there are a few frames in which an opening, a far wink of light shows in the dark. The exit from the night of the tunnel. It is only 20 frames and the sound has abated by then, so I hope the projectionists of the world will not cut off my delicate hint (but I have not much hope for this) nor people get up to leave too early.

*So there is hope?*

Not exactly. Hope is a lugubrious word. I prefer

to speak of faith. Since I am here, I must be having faith of some sort. In the film, the train doesn't come out of the tunnel, but there is that remote suggestion of light. How could one not have faith of some sort? After all, since I know nothing, Gideon, since we do not know why we are here . . . (this is getting to be the kind of talk that the *Vitelloni* used to engage in at one o'clock in the morning in their provincial café) . . . Faith derives from accepting the fact of one's total ignorance . . .

*Faith in mankind?*

Faith in oneself.

*Faith in your work?*

Don't you have it yourself? Here you are, interviewing me—don't you have faith in what you are doing?

*Not much. Partially it is a living, and partially an alibi. And only very deep down, in some remote part of myself, I believe that somewhere, somehow, somebody is actually going to read this and derive some benefit from it. Maybe two or three people, maybe a few more. But certainly not the masses. Making a film would be suicidal with this attitude, so I presume your faith goes further.*

But this is what faith is. To do something you believe in, in whatever way you normally do it. To do something that is yourself. To know that someone will read what you are doing now, will have an impression of the relationship you have with your friend Federico, of the thing you are creating that represents him and that represents yourself—the wish to say it, to write it, that is faith. And maybe we should feel some sort of joy, in a funny way, to be witnesses to what is happening around us.

*Where the women take Mastroianni to court in City of Women, he is asked: "Why did you choose to be born male?" Perhaps I could ask you: why did you choose to be born today? Not having had a choice in the matter would be the answer in both cases, but does that in itself impose a "making the best of it" attitude? In any case, faith in the doing doesn't necessarily mean faith in the utility of it.*

Well, what is there to do? What can anyone do? Concentrate on oneself, not in order to exclude relationships with others, but because only in yourself, in the end, can you find a meaning for your life, doing that which you know how to do, trying to defend it from all doubts and paralyzing perplexities, from all discomforts. Not being, by

vocation, a revolutionary, this becomes my real revolution. To propose this view, it seems to me, is the most revolutionary approach. The only thing I can suggest, anyway. I cannot fail to believe in what I do. Even though I see that it is becoming ever more difficult to do it, even though I do, at times, feel ridiculous to demand the attention of a hundred persons, who, at my command, work to establish a certain, particular ray of light to illuminate the blond head of a woman, with that particular precision . . . but if I did not believe in this madness, in this mad insistence on detail, in this rigor, and if I did not demand of others to share this madness, then indeed I would disintegrate totally. This is my way of having faith in myself, and thus in what I do. One is forced to recognize, at the same time, one's own limits, and to learn how to act within them. And these are my limits. Beyond this, I make no pretense.

*And beyond the cinema?*

It appears to me that I have few interests beyond this thing. This container, this framework, which at times may appear to be suffocating and make you feel vaguely un-topical, provides a discipline and clarifies your limits, and by limits I do not mean the prison-aspect of stopping your movements but the energy-producing need to stay within a prescribed, creative stance. Only he who is in prison can talk of liberty in a really moving and emotional way. The creative act needs restraints, requires a certain kind of bondage, of chains. These are the indispensable ingredients for the growth of the dream, the tension, the utopia, and for making it possible to feel one's way with secure intuition into other states of consciousness and into other dimensions. I am sure that in human history artists have always felt this.

*It seems to me that you are more optimistic about yourself than your work indicates. That is, inasmuch as I identify you, perhaps unjustly, with what City of Women says.*

It must be like that. You have to put together this immense facade, the mechanism of the film, and you have to be able to project an immense enthusiasm. Optimism and faith must be exuded to give you the force to involve others. But in any case, I do not consider myself a pessimist, nor do I really think that in the film pessimism is the final message. Not even ideologically, because *City of Women*, within the modest framework of

the tale that is told here, ends with the decision by the protagonist that it is worthwhile to continue the voyage, after he has gone through this upsetting dream made up of tenderness and horror. He is going on with the others, deciding that he will remain involved with them and with his inner soul, to see what could be derived from a last attempt of this kind. And the fact that the body of the film, the dream, seems pessimistic, is partially due to stupidly superficial optimistic expectations. If you approach it expecting to be comforted by illusions of a sentimental or ideological kind or by a simplistic and slightly obtuse vision of life, obviously you will be disappointed by the viewpoints presented. I just don't think that the word "pessimistic" can properly define him who tries to give you a new view on things. I think it is important to change one's position and focal length from time to time, see things from other angles. Even if this shocks or creates earthquakes in the mind of those who need security, cover, frameworks and roofs.

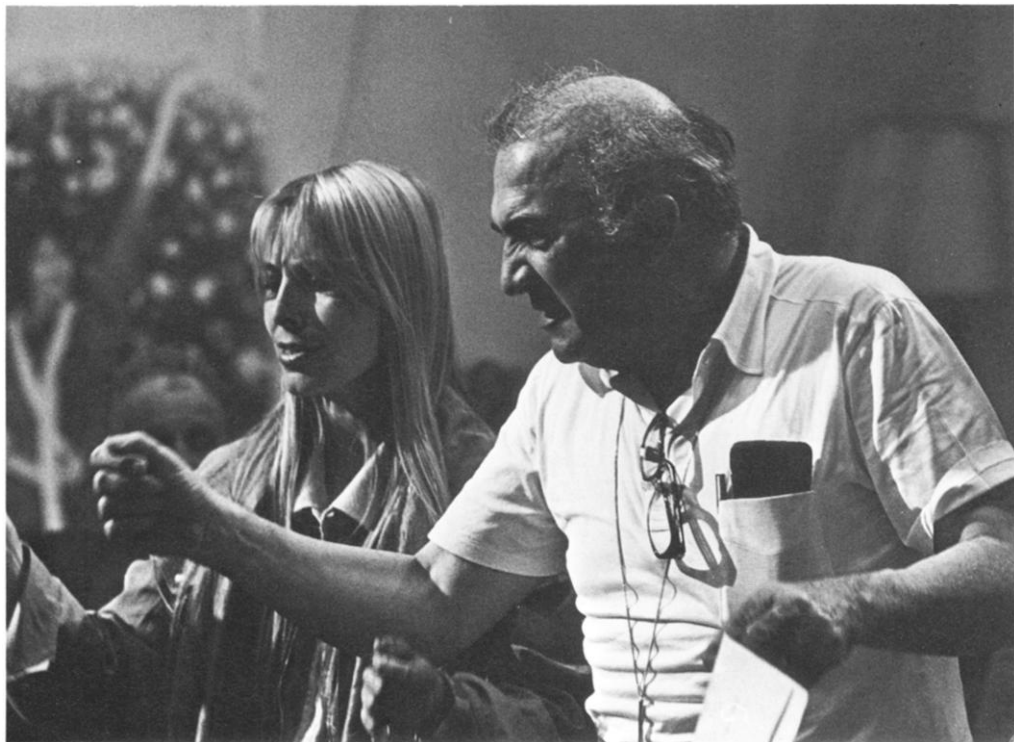
I think that for those who look upon life as a trip and who understand that there is both a plurality and a simultaneousness of viewpoints and levels of comprehension, this should be obvious.

He who gives us, through the example of his life or by the expression of his thought and his fantasy, a new view, helping us to pull our concepts out from under that dusty, dim light and out of that small, rational cage of intellect which imprisoned them and kept them from becoming individually significant for us, robbing us, perhaps, briefly, of the consolation of the familiar, of the daily dreariness, and giving back to them a more mysterious meaning, of a less predictable sort—I do not think that such a man should be accused of being pessimistic. He is, instead, a realist.

*Now that the film is finished and has been projected to selected audiences, what is your reaction to their reaction? Have you found, on the whole, that they seek the consolation of the familiar or are they open to the mysteriousness of the multiple meanings?*

I have not really followed the screenings with attention, but a certain tension seems to linger among the critics after they see it. At a special screening for young people, in Rome, I am told, many came out looking somewhat perplexed. And some women were angry. It seems to me that

*Fellini  
directing  
CITY  
OF  
WOMEN  
(Photos  
in this  
article  
by  
Deborah  
Imogen  
Beer)*



people don't sufficiently abandon themselves to just following the fable of the film. After all, that's all I have tried to make, a fable, like something told by one friend to others, some night after dinner.

Not being able to abandon themselves to the fable, it seems to me people don't see, either, that *City of Women* is really a film about the cinema, about the cinema seen as a woman, the cinema seen through its femininity, through the masturbatory discovery of its femininity. And I don't mean because of the scene where 20 boys on an enormous bed masturbate watching a film, but I mean the whole of the film, the way it is expressed, the things quoted in it in a hidden way, and again I don't just mean the quotes from the history of the cinema.

The film tries to make its way as a simple afternoon spectacle, of the kind we used to go and see in the Italian provinces in the afternoons of the thirties, or (to repeat something that seems to make little sense now) as a circus performance. A fable that needs not to be "understood"; after all, what is there to be understood? The film consists of a series of "numbers," like circus numbers, of which some will make you sad, some happy, some will leave you cold. It is conceived as an homage to the cinema, not as a competitor among its works.

*What do you mean by the cinema seen as a woman?*

I think the cinema is a woman by virtue of its ritualistic nature. This uterus which is the theater, the fetal darkness, the apparitions—all create a projected relationship, we project ourselves onto it, we become involved in a series of vicarious transpositions, and we make the screen assume the character of what we expect of it, just as we do with women, upon whom we impose ourselves. Woman being a series of projections invented by man. In history, she became our dream image.

*Thus when the terrorist girl in the end of City of Women shoots down the great hot air balloon which is womanhood, she is also shooting down the cinema?*

Except that the girl—that is also him, Marcello. The film is really a dream, and as in a dream everything is the dreamer.

*An Adlerian idea of Gestalt-psychology? Everything you dream is you?*

Actually I think it was an idea that had a certain currency 2000 years ago . . . Anyway, when Marcello-Snaporaz projects and invents, for the millionth time, a new liberation, a new incarnation of femininity seen as a madonna, as a wife, as a soubrette, as a balloon that carries him away from reality and he flies away with her, happy, into space, forgetting everything, his imagination carried away by this great behind, these breasts, this madonna-like smile with the lights of the procession in its halo, another part of him, another flicker of his consciousness, fearing that all this is just an inflated dream, shoots it down. It's his other self, terrorized, and thus it is a terrorist who kills the dream. But it is him, really, who does the shooting, one of his states of consciousness. Feeling that he has allowed himself to become victim to a dream of too puerile and too childish a nature, that he has disclaimed too much responsibility . . . But this other self turns out to be just as irresponsible, being full of moralizing rigors, of fears. The ones who shoot usually shoot out of fear. Anyway, he precipitates earthward, again hoping to be saved by another female figure, but he wakes up, back in the train, only that his glasses, which he had broken in the dream, are really broken now . . .

*So Snaporaz is also all the women he dreams in the film, and the film, as we said in our first encounter, is not really a film about women but a film about man. Or a film about one man.*

A film about one man, a man who invents woman. She is his metaphor, his obscurity, the part of himself he doesn't know, and about which he feels a fatal necessity to create ever new hypotheses. He seeks himself through woman. Or he seeks the part in himself which is woman. But it is clear that he knows nothing about women, he isn't able to create in his imagination/film a single outstanding, real person, which is why the film has no real female protagonists. There are just thousands of faces, of mouths, of smiles, of looks, of voices. My feminist critics are even now saying that in the whole film there isn't one real woman. Of course there isn't. There wasn't meant to be. Because if there was a real woman, it would have been useless to make the film.

How can he recognize her, anyway, being in her middle? He is at her center. Woman has



become everything for him: sky, earth, water, landscape . . . it's him, woman. So how can he see her? That is the story of the film. The story of a voyage seeking for something that can never be met because you are in it. And, what's more, he doesn't want to come out of it, for profound reasons of his own. In fact, the end itself, if I wanted to apply a cheap form of symbolism, could be seen in this key: the tunnel, the uterus, and the train, the rigid thing, which wishes to enter but is instead sucked up by it . . .

*In all accounts of reincarnation the people telling of their being "reborn" invariably describe the act of it as coming out through a long, dark tunnel, and how painful the outside is, how unwillingly they are forced through the channel, almost like a punishment. There is opposition to recognizing the world, just in the same manner you describe: the protagonist's inability to perceive that which he is too much in the middle of. Now if we take your equation of cinema—woman—world,*

*your film, in a way, becomes a metaphor for our not taking cognizance of our world as a result of being too much inside of it. "The world is too much with us . . ." Is that an interpretation of City of Women which you could accept?*

Decidedly. In fact, I wish you would write these things. How we do not really perceive our own world . . . Said simply, like this, without too much cultural or theosophic suggestivity . . . I myself feel embarrassed to speak of my film in these terms. I am not called upon to discuss my film but to make it. I don't like to come on explaining, why did Pinocchio meet his father in the belly of the whale, why do the cat and the fox hang him, why doesn't he die once hung . . . it makes no sense, all these explanations, and it is stupid, mortifying for the film, covering it with this cage network of interpretations, until it becomes unrecognizable in the end. Unrecognizable even to myself.

*Well, we'd better stop talking about it, then.*

**BRIAN HENDERSON**

## The Searchers: An American Dilemma

Dedicated to the memory of  
James Blue, 1930-1980

In a 1979 article, Stuart Byron surveys the influence of John Ford's film *The Searchers* (1956) on several young directors and screenwriters.<sup>1</sup> "In one way or another," he concludes, "the film relates to Paul Schrader, John Milius, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Michael Cimino; to *Hardcore*, *Taxi Driver*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Dillinger*, *Mean Streets*, *Big Wednesday*, *The Deer Hunter*, *The Wind and the Lion*, *Ulzana's Raid*, and *Star Wars* . . . When one film obsesses so much talent, it won't do just to call it a cult movie. *The Searchers* is the Super-Cult movie of the New Hollywood."

The film-makers Byron discusses do not hesitate to confirm his argument. Milius: "The best American movie—and its protagonist, Ethan Edwards, is the one classic character in films. I've named

my own son Ethan after him. I've seen it 60 times." Schrader: "I make sure I see *The Searchers* at least once a year. God knows that there are movies that are better acted or better written, but *The Searchers* play the fullest artistic hand." "Scorsese and I agree that *The Searchers* is the best American film, a fact that must have influenced *Taxi Driver*." Scorsese: "The dialogue is like poetry! And the changes of expressions are so subtle, so magnificent! I see it once or twice a year." Spielberg: "*The Searchers* has so many superlatives going for it. It's John Wayne's best performance . . . It's a study in dramatic framing and composition. It contains the single most harrowing moment in any film I've ever seen. It is high on my twenty-favorite-film list." Spielberg says he has seen the film a dozen times, including twice on location with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Byron argues that four recent films in particular have a basic story structure identical to and in-